



Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



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Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

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Grudging Partner: South Korea's Response to U.S. Security Policies

S E O N G H O S H E E N

Executive Summary

- As one of the U.S.' strongest allies in the Asia-Pacific region, South Korea has strategic and economic interests in maintaining close relations with the United States, and welcomes increased U.S. commitment to the region. South Korea supports the U.S. policy of forward military presence as a critical deterrent against North Korea's continuing military threat, and may accept U.S. military presence on the unified Korean Peninsula, though on a smaller scale, because it sees the U.S. role as a stabilizer against other regional powers such as China and Japan.
- Since President Bush took office, differences over North Korea policy have strained the relations between the United States and South Korea. Seoul's tendency to focus on North Korean "intention" with its nuclear program as a deterrent and "bargaining tool" creates a rift with Washington which focuses on Pyongyang's nuclear "capabilities" as a direct, immediate threat.
- South Korea's position toward the U.S. missile defense initiative ambivalent at best as it tries not to offend either China or North Korea. The U.S. policy of preemption and the perceived unilateralist tendencies of Washington worry Seoul as it fears that those policies could lead to a disastrous war with North Korea at the expense of South Korean security and prosperity.
- Differences between the United States and South Korea over North Korea policy exacerbates anti-American sentiment in the mainstream South Korean public, which views the United States as an obstacle to inter-Korean reconciliation and unification. The election of a new president in the ROK, who publicly disagreed with U.S. policies during his campaign, has complicated both alliance management and coordination of North Korea policy.
- To meet the challenge of anti-Americanism and maintain a strong alliance, the two allies should make a concerted effort to convince the Korean public that U.S. presence and policies are best geared for the security and a peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula. While emphasizing common interest and a unified front in dealing with North Korea, the two governments should prepare for a future alliance in a changing environment by developing a new rationale and force structure for continuing the U.S. presence in a possibly unified Korea.

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SOUTH KOREA'S SUPPORT FOR U.S. POLICY

South Korea welcomes increased U.S. interest and commitment in East Asia. South Korea, like many other countries in Asia, has a vital interest in keeping close economic and security relations with the United States. The United States has been the largest market for the export-oriented South Korean economy. The United States has provided South Korea with security, a critical contribution to South Korea's stable economic development. South Korea recognizes the importance of U.S. power and leadership in world politics, and regards maintaining friendly relations with the United States as the backbone of its foreign and defense policies.

U.S. forward military presence is well accepted by South Korea for its own security interests. Both the U.S. and South Korean governments favor an American military presence on the Korean Peninsula as a critical deterrent against the communist North. Under the armistice agreement from the Korean War, the two Koreas still remain technically at war without a peace treaty despite recent rapprochement efforts between the two archenemies. Whether a scenario of internal collapse or desperate act of aggression, a failing North Korean regime armed with weapons of mass destruction poses a potent threat to the peninsula a decade after the cold war. South Korea hosts about 37,000 U.S. soldiers, the second largest number after Japan in Asia.

South Korea has worked closely with U.S. military forces in maintaining a strong alliance with the United States. Under the Combined Forces Command in Yongsan, South Korea's military forces are effectively integrated into the U.S. war strategy which maintains readiness to meet any threat from North Korea. The extensive military cooperation with the United States includes combined defense planning, joint training exercises, intelligence integration and sharing, a sophisticated logistical interface, educational exchanges, and defense industry cooperation.

South Korea has also moved to strengthen its traditional ties with U.S. military forces by selecting U.S. weapons systems for its ambitious military upgrade projects. After years of deliberation surrounded by controversy, in May 2002 the Korean government finally announced the selection of America's Boeing Corporation as the main contractor for the ROK Air Force's next generation fighter project, called FX. The deal, worth more than \$4 billion, includes Boeing's provision of 40 F-15K advanced fighter jets to the Korean Air Force by 2008.

The decision generated heated public and diplomatic controversies because the French competitor, Dassault Aviation, submitted a lower bid promising more technology transfers. Public opinion tended to prefer a newly developed French model to a more than two-decade-old American aircraft. Later, the ROK Defense Ministry acknowledged that interoperability with U.S. forces and alliance considerations were the critical factors in its final decision. South Korea will most likely adopt U.S. systems in other military projects as well, including the selection of the U.S. Aegis system for the radar system on its next-generation Navy destroyers.

Despite a dim memory of the Korean War and the rise of new, independent-minded generations within society, most South Koreans still believe that the U.S. military presence is critical for South Korea's national security as a key deterrent against North Korea's military threat. South Korea may accept a continued U.S. presence even after the North Korean threat disappears with the unification of the Korean Peninsula. Although there will be less demand for immediate U.S. protection, a unified Korea may find a U.S.

presence still useful and necessary as a stabilizer in Northeast Asia against regional powers such as Japan and China.

South Korea expressed its full support for U.S. efforts to fight terrorism after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Seoul announced that it would provide all necessary assistance to the United States. The government has sent a military hospital unit and transportation aircraft to assist the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan. To the U.S. request for combat troops, however, the Korean government was less enthusiastic. The government was wary of public concern about Korean casualties abroad. This was disappointing for Washington, especially given more active support by Japan—including the dispatch of Japan's Self Defense Navy. In the end, responding to continued U.S. requests for combat unit support, the ROK government dispatched an engineer battalion to help reconstruction in Afghanistan.

NORTH KOREA'S WMD: CAPABILITY VS INTENTION

Since President Bush took office, differences over North Korea policy have strained relations between the two allies, and shaped Seoul's view on America's Asia-Pacific policy. Washington's increased attention and new focus on North Korea as a main threat to its national security has not always been welcome in Seoul as it tries to develop more friendly relations with Pyongyang under President Kim Dae Jung's vision for engagement. South Korea found that its security interest vis-à-vis North Korea is not always in concert with that of the United States, which in turn made Seoul's position ambivalent toward new U.S. security policies.

South Korea's ambivalence about U.S. policy starts from a different perception of North Korea's threat. For the United States, North Korea poses a more immediate and direct threat to national security because of its active programs on nuclear, long-range missiles, and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). North Korea is indeed the only country among other rogue states that has "capabilities" for producing both WMD and their delivery systems. Ending North Korea's WMD capabilities and thwarting its proliferation efforts occupy a top priority in U.S. nonproliferation policy, and have become a primary objective for Washington's North Korea policy.

Although South Korea understands American concerns, Seoul seems less concerned with the additional threat of North Korea's WMD to its own national security, given the formidable threat already posed by North Korea's conventional forces along the demilitarized zone (DMZ). North Korea's nuclear and other WMDs are perceived as deterrence measures against the United States rather than offensive weapons aimed at South Korea. South Korea increasingly regards an unprovoked attack by North Korea as unlikely and tends to emphasize North Korean "intention" as opposed to "capability" with regard to its WMD and missiles. Many South Koreans think that it is impossible for North Korea to use WMD on fellow Koreans.

South Korea's major concern regarding the North Korean threat is a possibility of crisis on the peninsula either through military confrontation or a regime collapse rather than Pyongyang's WMD capabilities. For South Korea, easing the tension between the two Koreas and preventing any crisis that could threaten South Korean prosperity has become the first priority. The recent revelation of Pyongyang's secret nuclear program created little panic amongst South Korea's public. South Korea and its political leaders

have been more worried about President Bush than Kim Jong II. Fearing that President Bush would not have the patience to engage in dialogue with North Korea, and that a tough U.S. reaction would cause a crisis on the peninsula.

Recently, the South Korean government has begun to put more emphasis on North Korea's missiles and WMD in an effort to lessen the possibility of crisis between Pyongyang and Washington. While the different emphases in U.S. and South Korean policies remain, South Korea has elevated the nuclear and missile issues to the top of its diplomatic agenda with North Korea. South Korean president Kim Dae Jung strongly condemned Pyongyang's nuclear weapons as unacceptable for South Korea. However, the comment reflected Seoul's deep fear that without resolution of the nuclear issue, the Bush administration will not moderate its tougher stance toward Pyongyang and the nuclear crisis of 1994 will reoccur.

BROADEN DIVERGENCES IN U.S.-ROK SECURITY POLICIES

The different perception of North Korean threats leads South Korea to diverging views on other U.S. national security policies including missile defense, preemption, and unilateralism. The South Korean government worries that its participation in missile defense could provoke its two most important neighbors, North Korea and China. South Korea worries that missile defense antagonizes Pyongyang whose missiles are among the main targets of the program. Pyongyang has denounced the U.S. missile defense initiative as an active policy of aggression and a direct threat to North Korean security. South Korea's participation in U.S. missile defense could obviously harm its relations with North Korea, and jeopardize the reconciliation process.

Missile defense cooperation with the United States would complicate South Korea's relations with China because Beijing regards the real target of the U.S. initiative as its own ballistic missile capability. Once missile defense is completed, it may put China in a critical strategic imbalance in favor of the United States and cripple China's power projection capabilities in the region. South Korea cannot ignore Chinese concerns, as the political and the economic ties between the two countries have grown rapidly in recent years. Debates in South Korea have surfaced about whether a unified Korea should become more neutral or even lean toward China and away from the United States in its future alliance strategy. One way for the South Korean government to finesse the missile defense issue has been to claim that it does not have the financial resources to participate in the program. However, this is not very convincing given South Korea's financial dedication to many other military projects deemed important for its national security.

South Korea is also deeply troubled by the U.S. declared policy of preemption. Recognizing the aggressive nature of North Korean military strategy with over 10,000 artillery pieces aimed at more than 10 million people in Seoul, South Korea fears that any military confrontation on the peninsula would be a disaster that should be avoided at all costs. Seoul believes that any U.S. attempt of preemption against North Korea would lead to war. The U.S. preemption policy adds to South Korean anxiety as North Korean defiance on its nuclear program continues. Although South Korea has not publicly denounced the preemption policy, it is highly unlikely that it will support any U.S. preemptive attack on North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

South Korea is also concerned about the unilateral tendency of U.S. policy after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Despite continuing U.S. pledges not to invade North Korea and its commitment to peaceful and multilateral approaches involving United Nations and neighboring countries, Seoul worries that the unilateralist tendency may lead Washington to brandish hard-line policies toward Pyongyang without consulting Seoul. The worst scenario would be a U.S. unilateral decision to punish North Korea with a military campaign against its nuclear facilities. There is a widespread concern that North Korea could be the next target of U.S. attack after Iraq. Recently, the United States did not concur with South Korea and Japan's plea for continuing heavy oil shipments to North Korea not to escalate the nuclear confrontation, and punished Pyongyang by cutting the fuel supply. South Korea worries that North Korea's continuing brinkmanship may well trigger other U.S. unilateral decisions, including military action.

GROWING ANTI-AMERICANISM

Differences between the United States and South Korea over North Korea policy have exacerbated anti-American sentiment in South Korea. Many South Koreans have come to view the United States as a spoiler of the inter-Korean reconciliation process. To South Koreans, Washington's policies appear to create crises on the Korean Peninsula by provoking North Korea into desperate moves. More of the South Korean public is beginning to question South Korea's support of U.S. policies, which is causing grave concern for the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The Bush administration's uncompromising policies toward North Korea, as perceived by many Koreans, tend to conflict with South Korea's engagement efforts with Pyongyang. As relations between the United States and North Korea have soured, inter-Korean dialogues have also suffered setbacks. President Bush's harsh views of the North Korean regime, manifested in the "axis of evil" comment and his alleged "loathe" Kim Jong II statement, deeply worry many Koreans, including those in the government. Bush's statements have raised anti-Americanism in the public mind because the United States appeared to be willing to take any unilateral measure, including attacking North Korea, at the cost of South Korean security.

Anti-American sentiments make many South Koreans question the need for U.S. military presence on the peninsula. The younger generations, including those in their 30s and 40s who are assuming prominent positions in Korean society, do not have a first hand memory of the Korean War. They see North Korea as less threatening and the possibility of another war as less likely. Instead, they ask why the United States is bullying the North and causing an unnecessary crisis on the peninsula. South Korea's younger generations increasingly see U.S. troops not as guarantors of security but as obstacles to reunification.

In an effort to exploit those sentiments, North Korea recently made an unusual appeal to South Korea to join in pressing the United States to sign a nonaggression treaty. The statement, in which Pyongyang repeatedly spoke of the North and South as a single nation, was apparently intended to appeal to the strong and growing public sympathy toward North Korea based on mounting tensions between South Korea and the United States.

Domestic issues involving U.S. forces have also heightened anti-American sentiment and public skepticism on the rationale of having U.S. troops in South Korea. As Korean

society becomes more prosperous and self-confident, it has become less tolerant of inconvenience and unfortunate incidents caused by the U.S. military presence—such as infringement of private rights by training exercises and crimes committed by soldiers. The issue of moving the main U.S. military base in Seoul, Yongsan military garrison, became the focus of an intense public debate. Last year, the announcement of U.S. plans to construct a new apartment complex at Yongsan base, a prime real estate in downtown Seoul, ignited public protests over the permanence of a U.S. military presence in the center of the capital.

Other issues, such as pollution involving U.S.F.K bases and complaints about training exercises, all contribute to severe public criticisms of the United States, and are making cooperation between the two governments more difficult. Even South Korea's decision to purchase U.S. military aircraft and warship systems was seriously criticized by the public, who questioned the alleged "imperialistic" U.S. pressure for a contract involving billions of dollars for South Korea's national defense.

The anti-American movement had a direct impact on South Korea's December 2002 presidential election. The accidental death of two schoolgirls during a U.S. training exercise and the acquittal by a U.S. military court of the soldiers involved caused huge public anger against the United States. As the election day approached, tens of thousands of people, mostly average citizens with their children, joined anti-American demonstrations in downtown Seoul, calling for the revision of Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and a public apology by President Bush.

The surprising victory of Roh Moo Hyun, a former labor lawyer from the governing Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), over more conservative candidate with close ties with the United States, was largely attributed to the surge of anti-American sentiment. During his campaign, Roh vowed to seek more independent relations with the United States, and to continue engagement with North Korea despite the U.S. call for tougher action against North Korea's nuclear defiance. Although later president-elect Roh pledged to promote a more mature relationship with the United States, the two governments will have a difficult period of adjustment once Roh takes office, especially because the change comes amidst an escalating nuclear crisis on the peninsula.

CHALLENGES FOR THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

The growing mistrust in South Korea about U.S. North Korea policy and other grievances against America make it increasingly hard for the two allies to achieve mutual policy goals in other areas. South Korea's successful economic and political development has brought a more independent and self-confident public attitude towards the United States in recent years. The current crisis resulting from Pyongyang's brinkmanship drives a wedge between Washington and Seoul, causing an even wider and deeper anti-American sentiment. The problem is two-fold; increasing public discontent with U.S. forces in Korea and policy differences towards North Korea, both of which tend to reinforce each other and create an even bigger rift between the two countries.

To meet the challenge of anti-Americanism and thus maintain strong alliance, the two allies should make a concerted effort to convince the Korean public that U.S. military

presence and policies do not preclude inter-Korean reconciliation, and are best geared for the security and a peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula. President Bush has already made clear on several occasions that the United States will not launch a military attack on North Korea. The Bush administration's emphasis on a peaceful and diplomatic solution to North Korea's nuclear program was well accepted by South Korea. Washington and Seoul would be wise to emphasize their common interest in preventing Pyongyang from developing nuclear weapons, and come up with a unified front in North Korea policy through close consultation.

To develop a more mature alliance, the two governments need to make a conscious effort to promote an equal partnership based on mutual respect. Careful approach by the United States in showing respect for South Korean national pride and public opinion will be helpful in ameliorating negative perceptions. The United States could deal with local complaints and demands regarding its bases and personnel with more sensible responses, such as paying more attention to public sentiment and local demands for environmental protection and sensitive training exercises around U.S. bases. The South Korean government needs to clearly state its commitment to the alliance for its national security interest, working closely with the U.S. government to ease the public tension between the two countries.

In an effort to quell public anger over basing issues, the South Korean government and U.S.F.K. had decided to go ahead formally with the relocation process of Yongsan Base. South Korea agreed to pay most of the expenses, although it will take as long as 10 years to complete. In March 2002, the U.S. military forces in Korea announced plans to consolidate the 41 military bases scattered around South Korea into 23 locations, in accordance with the new U.S. military strategy. According to the Land Partnership Plan (LPP), the U.S.F.K. would return more than 50 percent of real estate currently occupied by the U.S. bases (potentially about 32,000 acres of commercial and agricultural land) to South Korea. This will help the South Korean government in alleviating public criticism towards U.S. military presence on Korean soil.

Indeed, the new U.S. military strategy focusing on forward deployment with small, lighter, and mobile forces may prove to be a win-win strategy for both governments. Such a strategy would help to meet the growing public uneasiness with U.S. military forces by reducing the burden of maintaining a heavy military presence. The U.S.F.K. may take a bold initiative to resolve controversial basing issues by moving Yongsan Garrison out of Seoul, along with base consolidations in other areas with help from the South Korean government. Such a move, however, should not be regarded as a weakening U.S. commitment to the alliance or the region.

Instead, the restructuring and the relocation of the U.S. military posture in South Korea should be designed to meet current challenges of the alliance while serving as a stepping-stone for preparing the U.S.-ROK alliance for a changing security environment, including the prospect of a unified Korea. The new Korea will likely seek greater independence in its relationship with the United States, and demand a new rationale for continuing U.S. military presence in the absence of an immediate threat posed by North Korea. Both governments should develop and clearly spell out a new objective for continuing the alliance beyond the current confrontation. This objective should be accompanied by a concrete and timely plan for appropriate changes in force structures and alliance strategy geared to a new environment and mission.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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